The Singers on Grodzka Street

CAROL LIPSZYC

Il s'agit de l'histoire vécue de deux femmes qui vivent plus ou moins une vie honorable. La narratrice, qui est leur voisine, est une turbulente jeune fille qui apprend que le sexe est une monnaie d'échange.

Grodzka Street where I was born and spent my childhood was a street built for adventurers. This was truer once Lublin was under siege and the first bombing left part of the city in rubble. Some residents claimed that Divine Providence looked down kindly on our street in September, 1939, protecting us from the bombs. Others attributed it to nothing more than random luck. Either way, my most immediate concerns were unchanged. Our apartment building at Grodzka 30 remained standing, as did the orphanage across the way where I continued to lead children to play hopskotch on the wide sidewalks or to ramble on the field called Grodzkaplac for a game of ball. And the children of the orphanage never tired of following me. We ran up Grodzka's cobblestoned hill like a school of salmon in shallow waters. Following the downward slope of Grodzka, we reached a narrow enclave, a medieval tunnel with stalls of jam-filled candies, jellies and chocolate-covered almonds for which we gladly gave up our golden groschen. At the end of the tunnel, in the open, stood bagel peddlers eager to sell their hot rings of bread, sprinkled with poppy seed or salt, and beggars who entered and exited the scene chanting their pleas for groschen in an unending chain of lament.

Grodzka might have been a street like any other in Poland, but it was our kingdom and the focal point of our lives. When we emerged from out of that chasm of dark and light, from out of that cauldron of human despair and budding commerce, the cadence of its voices still ringing in our ears, we were enchanted, even disappointed that no one knew of what had transpired or remarked as to the difference etched on our faces.

We children would soon become aware, as our parents must have been in those early days of war, that our dominion in the older Jewish district of Lublin was over, that we would be ruled by a new creed. We would, in fact, have to be far more economical and bear the narrowing job restrictions imposed upon us. We would have to bear the sporadic street beatings and stone throwing, and somehow stave off the coming cataclysm about which we had a sharp, yet inarticulate sense. There were some around us, however, whose definition of war and their place in it, presented a different equation.

Across the hall, in Apartment 3B, for instance, there lived a certain Mr. and Mrs. Singer. Keeping themselves socially separate and apart from the rest of the tenants, they were the only childless couple in the building. While the majority of families lived in a state of financial worry and growing insecurity, Mr. and Mrs. Singer enjoyed a lifestyle that climbed to levels of comfortable mediocrity in zloty and groschen, moderate abundance in goods and trinkets and acquired tastelessness.

Mrs. Singer, or Lola, was petite, with blonde hair, blue eyes like cool pools of water and a tiny seductive mouth. She moved, not with an aura of mystique, but with the promise of quotient fulfillment. Whatever the intent of the onlooker, her usual response came in an expression that read: "What business is it of yours?" And when we children gawked at her, a capricious trio that included myself, my first-cousin Heniek and my girlfriend, Leah,

from the orphanage, Mrs. Singer's grin was nothing short of intoxicating.

As for Mr. Singer, I expect most of the girls on the street harboured a secret crush on him, though no one openly admitted to a real infatuation. At ten, my childlike body was only on the brink of adolescence and the pleasurable eyeing of Mr. Singer was not a pastime I would have voluntarily acknowledged.

He preferred suits, gentle wools and tapered tweeds, suits made of a better quality fabric than my father, a tailor by trade, wore. I had a discriminating eye for such things as my father, Eleazar, worked at home. Clients came and went from an entrance next to our kitchen to be fitted, to freeze in front of the full length mirror with arms outstretched like scarecrows in a farmer's field while father pinned and tucked and folded. Mr. Singer was not a client of my father's but visited an equally reputable tailor whose shop was situated in the centre of town. How he carried himself! Mr. Singer wore vests prominently, neatly laundered shirts, and a smart, fashionable hat cocked on an angle, its brim lowered enough for him to appear unapproachable, without covering his grey, unerring eyes. He walked quickly, pulling out his pocket watch on a regular basis, as if he were always en route to a pressing engagement. Smiling broadly and generously at us one moment, he could just as abruptly withdraw his favour in the next. We were not easily discouraged. Like bees to honey, we were anxious to learn more about the Singers, preferring to embroil ourselves in their adult concerns rather than the childish games we had already outgrown.

The third figure was Sonya, close girlfriend of Mrs. Singer, a tall, dark-eyed, coal-haired beauty who wrapped her slick hair back so tightly in a bun that it became her immovable crown. Of the three, she was the least vocal, and I wondered where she came from and to what extent the Singers had influenced her decision to join them. Any naiveté she may have once possessed had washed off like a coat of paint. In its place she exhibited a disengagement from the world, a wilful aloofness. Her skin was transparent and her features so finely carved they looked surreal. She walked through the halls with the regal air of a dethroned Queen who had no subjects to rule.

The three traced each other's steps, forming a sinister shadow wherever they went. What a strange family they made, together much of the time, resilient in their ruthlessness. That was the sin for which they were not forgiven. That, in retrospect, turned out to be a somewhat premature judgement on our part.

During the earliest months of the war, Mrs. Singer and Sonya greeted German soldiers at the entrance of the building. By seven-thirty, eight o'clock, a company of colluders and invaders climbed up the small set of stairs to the front doors. In the hallway, we could hear for the first time the estranged mix of German and Polish, and when meaning was temporarily lost, Yiddish, the bastard barterer, was brought in to seal the offer. The apartment door was slammed shut though the uproar from the Singers' flat kept us awake till the early hours of the morning. Thin scratchy music accompanied voices that bellowed in a raucous match of upmanship. Dancing and shuffling of feet thumped in broken rhythms; drunken laughter bounced off the walls. During these entertaining soirees, Mrs. Singer shooed her husband out of the building. In turn, Mr. Singer patrolled the streets for future patronage, that is, until the German-imposed curfew of Jews began. Many in the building swore that the husband masterminded everything. The question was put: "What kind of man is he?" To which someone replied: "A man who has no pride." People voiced prophecies of doom, predictable as their omens were. "Horror and shame will fall on their heads. A curse on them all." The entire neighborhood fuelled the rumours. Whispers became agitated talk, which transformed into malicious tongue-wagging and finger-pointing. Heads bobbing up and down, our neighbors recited anecdotes that took great liberties with the line between fact and fiction, pleased with themselves for not having sunk to the Singers' depravity. We children imitated our parents' scorn, giggling whenever Mrs. Singer or Sonya came in sight.

Soon, our ridicule of the Singers took a new form. We began stringing words together and eventually wrote a verse about the Singers, which we put to a nondescript Yiddish melody and sang as much for the rhyme as for the subtext. Leah, a friend from the orphanage, whose knobby legs and frail body made me fear for her safety,

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possessed the surest voice of the group and started us up voluntarily, raising her voice like an invisible baton. I yielded my leadership to her as a good singing voice was something you couldn't deny. Like wandering balladeers, a ragged army of foot soldiers who do not flaunt themselves in front of their opponents, we sang this song behind their backs, after the Singers and Sonya had passed from view. I remember the words still, though the melody has intertwined itself with others.

Tell me what the Singers sell
Is it something worthy?
The Germans come
And pay their zlotys
At Grodzka number 30

Dark-haired Sonya tum ba la la
Which one will she choose?
She only sells to those who march
To the step of the German goose.

The reasons for children turning immoral were discussed in the hallways and outdoor stoops, and this we lent a careful ear to for fear we might catch what the Singers had. Mrs. Pinkus confirmed that it had never been a question of upbringing in the case of Mr. Singer. His father was a pious Jew who, apart from his daily visits to the synagogue, lived inconspicuously at the back of our building. It was fitting for him to live there, tucked away from public scrutiny, Mrs. Pinkus pronounced with an equal portion of concern and disdain. When she was finished, a signal to all present that the discussion was closed, she pressed her lips so tightly they disappeared, invariably giving more prominence to her double chin. But the elderly Mr. Singer did not remain ignorant of the truth. When soldiers entered his son's apartment, he stood and watched, his beard and face blending into a deathly shade of white. I was certain I had seen a ghost in the disguise of a man. Raising his collar to cover his face, he retreated to his apartment. We children spared little sympathy for Mr. Singer's father; the story and how it would end interested us. We would not be kept in suspense for long.

On a mild winter night in 1940, there came a loud knocking on the wooden doors at the entrance of our building. The doors were tall and wide and had iron latches. I jumped out of bed and opened the front street window. Two German soldiers were calling out to Mrs. Singer to be let in. I was more than able to make out their words since Yiddish, my second language, was so close to German. I looked down on an empty Grodzka Street. The Germans formed silhouettes against the cold glare of the street lamp. Their voices echoed back and forth, ringing a message to a dominated world. *We not only presume to occupy. We own.* Soon, their fists were pounding down the doors, and our neighbours, awakened by the noise, could be heard loitering through the hallways and crowding the stairs.

Where was Mr. Singer when we needed him, I wondered as I stood at the window. He could have cleared up what appeared to be a double booking. The soldiers resumed their mating call.

"Mrs. Singer, when is it our turn? Have you forgotten so quickly?" One soldier turned to face the other.

"Women are fickle. Have *you* so quickly forgotten?" At that, both men howled.

"Let us in, we say, Mrs. Singer. Sonya. *Aufmachen schnell.*[1] An order's an order." The two soldiers held each other up.

If there was ever a chance to uncover at least part of the mystery that existed between men and women, that moment had arrived. My parents and brothers, Izzy and Heniek were awake and dressing in such haste that socks went missing and shoes were placed on the wrong feet. With plenty of scolding and scuffles about whose item of clothing went where, I rushed out, determined to maintain my record as the one on the front lines. Pushing through what was now a crowd of people who had congregated in the main hall at the entrance, I placed myself ahead of the others, a few feet away from the front doors. The neighbours' voices were pitched in nervous excitement on the subject of the Singers; the rift the couple had caused between our neighbours was widening.

"She won't let them in. Not when they're with officers up there. She knows who is buttering her bread."

"Buttering her bread. What German would do that for us?"

"Us. She is not one of us."

"They were officers, I tell you. I saw them with my own eyes. If you are going to sell it, why not sell to the highest bidder?"

"What money they pay them, they'll never keep."

The banging had turned to thunder. "*Aufmachen, hast du nicht verstanden?*"[2]

My heart pounded in double time. The door handles rattled but held fast. After a moment of protracted silence, we assumed the two soldiers had abandoned their pursuit of Mrs. Singer and Sonya. Then, gunshots were fired, piercing holes through the wood. A bullet whizzed by me, grazing my finger. I screamed and dashed back in the direction of our apartment, blood trickling down my right index finger and hand, staining my pajama sleeve.

At first sight of their prodigal daughter, my parents, who were peering out from our apartment door, yanked me back in to relative safety. Why, but why had I stood so close, they pleaded, running out alone? I was trembling

a little, and as they scolded, the two clinically examined my grazed finger, taking turns raising and lowering it.

Disoriented from the firing of the gun, I was hypnotized by my wound, by my secretly-stored blood, and by the way that blood was so easily expelled from the inside-out. I felt a pang of disappointment too since no information had been gained on my curious topic. Still, my courage and luck for survival had been tested; I had come bone-close to disaster and had dodged it.

The next morning, a rumour spread through the Jewish quarter of Lublin, or at least among the Jews that knew of the Finkelsteins, my mother's family and the Handelsmans, my father's side. It was said that a young girl had died at the hands of two German soldiers on the previous night. I was at the centre of a tragedy that had never occurred. Relatives and friends rushed over to the apartment to hear the news first-hand and console my parents in their grief. My paternal grandmother, Sara, bolted in with her hands waving furiously and a tiny procession of foot-soldiering cousins behind. Heniek, shaken and emboldened by the nearness of death and the newsworthiness of the moment, cried out, "Is Roza dead? Really dead?" It was a false call, I reassured them all, as I was alive and standing before them in flesh and blood. Still, I bragged that only I had been at death's door, at which point everyone respectfully applauded.

Within months, this skirmish faded into nothing more than a humorous story. Passing edicts compressed our lives, sinking all hope like sediment. My formal education at the public school ended in September, 1939, at the start of fourth grade. What I learned about the written word came from the Yiddish stories of Shalom Aleichem, which my father read aloud nightly, patiently, at my bedside, during my six-week ordeal with scarlet fever. From his sing-song voice, trouble brewed and prayers went unanswered for dairymen and tailors, dreamers and schoolchildren in their commiserate quest for riches and pleasures of a kind.

That interval of childhood was quickly stolen. In the first month of 1940, we were forced out of our apartment on beloved Grodzka, permitted to take with us only a few belongings. Father rented a private room on Szeroka, in one of the remaining areas Jews could freely move, to sew for a handful of private customers. My mother, my two brothers and I escaped to the countryside, to the hamlet, Osmolice, my grandmother Tammy's birthplace, where we shared a shack with other fleeing members of my maternal family. Osmolice had been our summer playground, its woods home to Gypsy families who lit small fires to cook, played gay and sorrowful melodies on fiddles to dance, as my cousins and I skid down the dip of its valley. On its Bystrzyca River banks, I discovered I was not fearless in my surrender to water. But by 1941, Osmolice became a place of internment. To earn money for food, mother, older brother, Izzy, and I picked white sugar beets for Polish landowners in Osmolice and nearby Zabiwola, the expansiveness of the fields made all the more poignant on those long summer days.

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Unlike our family, our fellow Jews, the Singers and Sonya had free rein in their hometown, enjoying a fly-by-night prominence. Up to 1941, Mrs. Singer and Sonya pranced through the city on a *droshky*[3] with their German clientele. But come that year, the German military was replaced by the S.S., and there were to be no more rides in open view. The Singers' business deal with the enemy went bust as Hans Frank's General Gouvernement set into motion a campaign of uncompromising brutality. If we had been zealous in our moral judgement of the Singers and Sonya, they had miscalculated the power of their sexual allure. From all accounts, Mr. and Mrs. Singer and Sonya were incarcerated in the Zamkowa prison in Lublin and shot there. Mr. Singer's father was carted off to the first ghetto in Lublin at the end of March, 1941, and deported to the death camp at Belzec a year later. We did not survive as a family for long in Osmolice. Only I lived to see liberation by assuming a Polish Catholic identity during the war.

After their imprisonment in the second ghetto, Majdan Tatarski, Leah, the children and staff of the Ochronka orphanage were executed on March 24, 1942. The building on Grodzka, which still stands today, bears a plaque to commemorate that date. The rectangular plaque is small, its engraved letters unobtrusive; its words memorialize not the pious or corrupt, but the young victims who would not have grasped the meaning of the words. And when it was all over, I wonder, did God compensate the Jews,

beautiful conspirators like Lola and Sonya, for their earthly sins? Was there room enough in heaven for Mr. and Mrs. Singer, Mr. Singer's father, Sonya and their killers too?

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[1]Open up quickly.
[2]Open up. Did you not understand?
[3]Low four-wheeled open carriage.

TARA KAINER

Late Bloomer

You took all summer.
Potted flowers I bought
in the spring sat
dormant on the fire escape
through gentle rains
and hot, hazy days while
all around trees burst
into leaf, and below,
in the garden, tulips
and daffodils, peonies and
cosmos rushed headlong
to glory.
You sat still
unperturbed,
your ragged foliage
upturned and smiling
while fruits withered
on the vine, leaves
browned and curled,
you emerged, round
tight buds at first,
then a steady unfolding:
tiny white petals,
luminous centers, a
plethora of suns
fringed by a blazing corona.

Now grey day crowds in
around you, punishing wind
rises. You hold on. Wintry
nights press close,
time is short, but oh!
so precious, you
white queen of the moonlight
bearing your white chrysanthemum
truth ancient as Confucius
ubiquitous as the wind
are rooted to your place
high above the garden
of those blackened, impassioned
flowers.

Tara Kainer's poetry appears earlier in this volume. This poem appeared in her poetry collection, When I Think On Your Lives *(Hidden Book Press, 2011). Reprinted with permission of the author.*